

THE ORTHODOXY AND SPORTS

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SUMMARY

The scientific contribution of this paper consists of an innovative approach to the issues of Orthodox faith and sport, which opens up a new creative area for theology itself, where sport also gets new opportunities. Given the known "affair" in almost all sports branches, which illustrate the state of "alarming helplessness", the contribution of faith in solving it is indisputable, especially in the way advocated in this research work. The primary goal is to extract from the plethora of theological literature those contents that can encourage the creative responsibility of all positive factors of sports events, from the athletes themselves, through their managers and club officials to the fans. Recognizing these problems and referring to theological sources as "clear content", without the bias of the members, with critical awareness, qualifies work to search and find adequate answers to the asked questions. The mere fact that a new research field has been opened, without the intention to make the last word on this, points to the scientific contribution of this paper.

Key words: Orthodoxy, physical culture, sport

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Physical culture is just as important as spiritual culture. God comes together physically and spiritually in one man much like the Divine and the Human come together in one individual, the Almighty Lord Jesus Christ. The entire

human life is built upon the unification of the one and the other. It is not by chance that today, and very often for that matter the issue of the relation to physical culture and sports is raised in church topics. Why is this issue so important? Why do the Orthodox Christians wonder whether physical culture and sports are useful or not? It seems that we all want to be healthy and strong, and we do not want to be ill. Even some opponents of a healthy lifestyle, which believe that physical culture and sports are not necessary for the salvation of the soul, and that they can even be the object of sinful behavior for an Orthodox Christian are discussing these issues. We will try to clarify this issue in our presentation below.

From the Gospel we see that Christ resurrected the dead and healed the ill. We rarely think about what the human body means to God himself who created it with love for everlasting life, and what it could mean to us. And indeed, our body was created by God, and that is why it is physically so perfect for the Lord "invested His Love" in it. Apostle Paul wrote: "Therefore, glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's" (1. Cor. 6:20).

Stefanović thinks that the health of our bodies and excellent physical results are an invaluable gift from God. This is apparent in his interview with a Serbian female athlete Jasna Šekarić, who has been named the best shooter of the 20th century and is one of the top five athletes of all time. *Šekarić believes that she has come to achieve success in sports thanks to God*: "I've won every title several times. Every single time I was just as happy as I was the first time. It's a gift from God, this feeling that I possess, and not many athletes have it".¹

Can a believer not respect this gift? The answer to this question is found in Orthodox asceticism, which teaches us that the life of the body must be aligned with the life of the soul, where physical health is not the only goal of a Christian. So it would be more correct to talk about how the body can contribute to the soul's salvation than whether the body is in the way of it.

THE VIEWS ON THE ORTHODOXY AND SPORTS

At the Orthodox Church and Sports panel, held at the St. Sava Parish Center in Belgrade, Serbia, in December 2012, Metropolitan Porphyrios (Prvoslav Perić) said the following:

¹ Đorđe Stefanović, *Sports Philosophy, Science, Theory and Practice*, Belgrade 2011, pg. 219.

“At a first glance, the Orthodox Church and sports don't have much in common because they have different views of interest. The subject or topic of interest of the Orthodox Church is the soul and spirit - the spiritual aspect of man's existence. When we think about sports, if we do not go deep into the topic we obviously think that sports are only about the body, and that the body is the most important aspect of sports.

However, in order to find a connection between the Orthodox Church and sports, we first need to see what kind of a relationship exists between the *spiritual* and the *physical*, between the soul and the body, when speaking of the Orthodox faith. And the Holy Fathers, the Holy Tradition, and the Holy Bible can help us with it without exception. On the other hand, when St. John of Damascus, for instance, speaks of the creation of the world in his exact exposition of the Orthodox faith, he says that God first created the angelic, mindful, bodiless world, followed by a material world, and at the end of creation he created a man, as St. Gregory puts it as well, a mixture of the soul and the body, the spiritual and the physical; he actually created a man as a kind of link between the physical and the spiritual, between the heavenly and the earthly. That is precisely because man was created as a union of the spiritual and the physical. In that unity for the Orthodox vision of the world, one is not more important than the other. The soul of the man is no more important than his body and vice versa. The soul and body were created at the same time, that is, an individual was created. In that unity between the spiritual and the physical there is a mutual effect, the effect of one on the other, the soul on the body, and vice versa. Everything that happens in the body is reflected in the soul and vice versa. For example, when a man's body is injured, we say that the man is injured. If our body is ill, we'll say "I'm ill". Or if we have some sort of spiritual or mental problem, we also say that the whole person is ill. Therefore, both elements, if we can say so, are healthy, or both elements are ill. That's why when we think about that famous saying "healthy body, healthy mind", we can equally say with the same accuracy that when the mind is healthy the body works well. Obviously, it is possible to speak about certain shortcomings, but the **notion of health** in this case is defined not as the absence of a shortcoming, but as *the proper inner and harmonized functioning of an individual*. Therefore, the Orthodox Church does not elevate the soul above the body, nor does it allow the body to be proclaimed as a kind of deity which we should worship, which is a kind of idol, and thus produces insufficient respect for the spiritual aspect of the human being.

When it comes to sports, we are talking about a special **talent**, a kind of gift from God that someone received. Therefore, that talent is not ours, it is a gift we have received. Whether someone is honest or not depends on our point of view, our activities, and the use of this gift. Therefore, a person who is gifted in any kind of sport has received this gift as his or her personal opportunity to glorify God and

serve another person; and at the same time, within that gift to fight against all urges, weaknesses and passion that consume him or her, and develop virtue, which is also something that depicts God.

If we want to say in a single sentence what the connection between the Orthodox Church and sports is, then we can say that the Church views sports as a human activity, as a canvas, as a space in which someone based on the gift he or she has received from God has the same chance of being saved and becoming a saint, as if, for example, he or she were an eremite in a cave on Mount Athos, or if he or she were doing any other kind of work. And at the same time, he or she has a chance to have everything that is bad inside them serve as a context and the foundation of their life."²

It is widely known that there is physical strength as an essential factor in the moving apparatus, but there is also the power of the mind which has made many knights and saints famous. There are many examples where we see that a person is physically very strong, but weak in spirit, and that such a person cannot even put up a decent fight against a street hooligan. There are also examples of persons powerless and physically very weak, but so powerful in spirit that the army regiments step back in front of them.

Take a moment to reflect on Aristotle who said that excessive physical exercise consumes the soul, and that the cure for it is in fact in **wise moderation**. Consequently, any overdoing in sports where the body and the material aspect of sports are idealized is quite anti-spiritual. And it is the very Orthodox Church that has the task of preaching that those who play sports should take care of the soul, of the continent of personality to the same extent to which they take care of their bodies, their strength, and their physical skills.

Today, sports have become one of the most lucrative kinds of business at the center of which there is a young man filled with enthusiasm and love for the game, for the competition. In addition to this enthusiasm and love towards God, which he declares in a sports game, today he often enters the jaws of various golden egg hunters, and many young talented athletes have unwittingly and unknowingly become slaves or gladiators in the sports arena. Therefore, in addition to experiencing this area as part of its activities, the Church should also take the position of a doctor because sports have lost the landmark they have once had.

² Porfirije Perić, The Orthodox Church and Sports. *"Beautiful Serbia", the Orthodox Sports Association Panel*. Belgrade. The St. Sava Parish Center, 2012

From this aspect, it is worth paying attention to the viewpoint represented by Metropolitan Hierotheos (Vlachos) when speaking of the Orthodox Christianity as a healing science: "Today's man feels he needs treatment. Along with the awareness of this fundamental need, every day I notice that Christianity, and especially the Orthodox Christianity that preserves the essence of Christianity to a large extent uses psychotherapy, and in other words, the Orthodox Christianity is mainly a therapeutic, healing science. Any means that it uses and its essential purpose involve a man's healing and his bringing to God. In order to enter into communion with God and attain a blessed state of worship, we must be healed first. That is why, in addition to all other interpretations, **the Orthodox Church is primarily a 'therapeutic', healing science and procedure.** It clearly differs from other psychiatric methods because it is teantropocentric, not anthropocentric. In addition, it does not complete its work with the help of human methods, but with the help and effect (Greek *ἐνέργεια*) of a divine blessing or, in essence, through *cooperation* (Greek *συνέργεια*) of the human and the divine will".³

Stefanović offers an interpretation of the Orthodox Church and sports from his own perspective: "It can be said that the Orthodoxy Christianity is a specific approach to competing of man against himself, while in sports it is a system of an athlete's preparation. The athlete's competition against himself is also reflected in the questions of 'who I am', 'what should I do', 'what is my power', and 'how does that translate into the everyday life'? From the Orthodox perspective, this can be, for example, a prayer that requires "mental fitness" much like an athlete needs physical fitness to succeed."⁴

In sports, we often see that some moves in a specific situation are conditioned by mood and observation. It's not just about pushing the ball, randomly kicking it. It's a thought, looking at the draw, and so on. And the man who has not come inside himself cannot look around because he has not recognized the man in himself and cannot look at another because he's looking at a rival. Any man needs to learn to have an *associate in another person*.

We also need a situation where in sports there are no losers, only the more or less successful. For example, when we come to a sports event where we do not know the end result or the winner in advance, we can hear that people have already agreed on what it's going to be. However, we keep going to the stadium and keep hearing "the Red Star is going to win" or "how does FC Jagodina even

³ Hierotheos (Vlachos), *Orthodox Psychotherapy: The Science of the Fathers*. Belgrade, 2010, p. 13

⁴ Đorđe Stefanović, *The Christian Prayer in Sports*. 3. The Innovative Research Symposium SINOVIS-2013, Belgrade 2013, pg. 2012.

dare win against the Red Star” or vice versa. That’s sports, that’s the uncertainty. In some ways, the Orthodox Christianity has its own uncertainty. Nothing is static, everything is dynamic. For clarification, we will quote the words of Stojanović: "This means that we're dealing with a permanent creative progression that is incomprehensible in a single definition. The Orthodox Church preserves this self-awareness and self-knowledge as a creative and progressive fact in its entirety, not as a default definition that closes it in a collective self-sufficiency..."⁵ Success and failure are not static, nothing is static as long as something new starts because it has new chances. We have the opportunity to observe a dirty situation in sports - are politics and interests interfering?

In the case of winning, one should restrain from that ugly supreme expression of satisfaction, and humiliation of the opponent, while the person who losses should restrain from depression and confusion. Both winning and losing should be regarded as a completely natural course of a sports event.

Let's take a look at the case of football. The competition should be the central event on the field. But today, as observers, we see that at some games there is a parallel occurrence - the fans who don't even know what is happening. Regardless of the course of the game, some of the so-called fans are not interested in the creative movements of the players or the game itself as a competition, and only care about a grossly inhuman pleasure to physically compete with each other because they have planned a fight in advance. It can be said that in part the central event has moved to the stands from the actual center of the sports event.

The case with the Church is similar. A church wedding is not a central event, it is the party at the venue. Everything has turned upside down. And now, the Orthodox Church and sports appear hand in hand - they have to restore what is the core of an event in the Church and in sports to the central stage. Well, God should allow our Christ-loving servants (for example, from Sveta Srbija Orthodox Sports Association) and many others to influence the young people and the fans to understand that sports are a cause for pleasure and joy, not for physical confrontation or fights. And we should always be the people of God, the Orthodox people.

⁵Ljubivoje Stanojević, *The Religious Systems*. Vršac 2012, pg. 120-121.

CONCLUSION

From the earliest times, the Holy Fathers have encouraged sports activities. Since as early as Cyril of Alexandria and the 4th century, the Fathers have spoken of the need for exercising the body, the need for preserving the body, especially when speaking to parents about the upbringing of children. The Holy Fathers as bishops, as teachers of the Church, have spoken of spiritual education, to the same extent underlining that for the sake of harmony and integrity of character, children need to be educated in sports activities that are known at the time.

Prayer in the Orthodox Church is of exceptional value as it includes many aspects of moving closer to God. An athlete who uses prayer should have a wider Christian education so that he can pour out the feelings from his soul to God. When a man in sports understands what the goal of a religious athlete is, what a win is in this world, what the prayer for a win means, how much God is present in sports, and whether an individual in the Orthodox Church can influence the outcome of a competition ... then it is easier to come to the realization how much prayer can help us in our godly life when it comes to sports that should be filled with love, ease, enjoyment, joy, abundance, and celebration.

The topic of the Orthodox Church and sports, which in a way indicates a kind of difference, actually does not exist as such. There is the Church and a man's life. The Church covers everything that is a man, and therefore sports, as something that is not only blessed, but blessed as an opportunity for achieving holiness and salvation.

Orthodox believers may and it would even be reasonable to exercise and play sports in the glory of God, that is, to act in the same way as stated in the Holy Bible. Well, if our goal is the upbringing, that is, the health of our own soul, among other things through physical activity, then that inner guide will not let us slip off the right path.

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ПРАВОСЛАВЉЕ И СПОРТ

САЖЕТАК

Научни допринос овог рада се састоји у иновативном приступу питањима православне вере и спорта, чиме се отвара једна нова стваралачка област за саму теологију, где и спорт добија нове могућности. С обзиром на познате нам „афере“ у скоро свим спортским гранама, које илуструју стање „алармантне немоћи“, допринос вере у решавању тога је неоспоран, посебно на начин који се заговара у овом истраживачком раду. Примарни циљ је да се из обиља теолошке литературе издвоје они садржаји који могу подстаћи стваралачку одговорност свих позитивних фактора спортских догађања, од самих спортиста, преко њихових менаџера и званичника клубова до навијача. Препознавање ових проблема и упућивање на теолошке изворе као „брстре садржаје“, без пристрасности припадника, са критичком свешћу, квалификује рад за тражење и налажење адекватних одговора на постављена питања. Сама чињеница да је отворено једно ново истраживачко поље, без намере да се да последња реч о томе, указује на научни допринос овог рада.

Кључне речи: Православље, физичка култура, спорт

ПРАВОСЛАВИЕ И СПОРТ

АННОТАЦИЯ

Научный вклад данной работы заключается в инновационном подходе к вопросам православной веры и спорта, который открывает новое творческое пространство для самого богословия, где спорт также получает новые возможности. Учитывая известное "проблемное положение" практически во всех спортивных отраслях, которое иллюстрирует состояние "тревожной беспомощности", вклад веры в его решение неоспорим, особенно в способ,

пропагандируемый в данной исследовательской работе. Основная цель - извлечь из множества богословской литературы то содержание, которое может стимулировать творческую ответственность всех позитивных факторов спортивных событий, от самих спортсменов, через их руководителей и должностных лиц клуба - до болельщиков. Признание этих проблем и обращение к богословским источникам как к "ясному содержанию", без предвзятости членов церкви, с критическим пониманием, квалифицирует работу по исследованию и поиску адекватных ответов на поставленные вопросы. Сам факт открытия нового научного направления, без намерения сказать об этом последнее слово, указывает на научный вклад данной работы.

Ключевые слова. Православие, физическая культура, спорт.

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